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IN THE CLASSROOM

Linking the Social Science Classroom with the Community: A Sample Curriculum Project

Sharon Anne Cook

Among the goals frequently cited for courses in History and the Social Sciences across Canada are the development of a sense of self worth, an attitude of personal responsibility, the skills necessary to be successful in the working world and an understanding of the role of the individual within the family. These goals clearly have some merit. The problem is, however, to create curricula that actually develop such attitudes and skills in students. The following project suggests some ideas towards achieving these laudable goals.

The Plan

The project teams students in the OAC (Ontario Academic Credit) "Families in Canadian Society" Course with residents of a local nursing home for six months. The students must visit the resident at least once a week for a minimum of one hour, complete a number of readings in the area of gerontology and write two reports. It is important to note that this is not a co-operative program. The students are not released during the school day,

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although their community work is reflected in a lighter assignment load.

The Objectives

Initially, the program was developed to help meet the particular needs of the students of Ottawa's Sir Wilfrid Laurier High School. At that time, this school had a large general level component—a number of students enrolled in grade 13 without strong academic skills. Their strength was in the social realm—they were gregarious, cheerful and highly energetic.

To make the most of these fine student qualities, two teachers (myself from the History Department and Dan Sigler from the Guidance Department) set out to reconstruct the course along more concrete lines through an extended field study. Also we were interested in applying the sociological principles from class to a real-life setting, so that our students would understand the course materials more easily, and even criticize theories which they found were not borne out in practice. A third objective emerged from many years of observing adolescent insularity and narcissism. It seemed to us that teenagers are encouraged

in their consuming self-interest by their limited contact with other generations, particularly the aged. We hoped to tap the natural generosity of these students by introducing them to a world where people are, by and large, lonely, underutilized and sad. Finally, we wanted them to realize that they could make a difference in these residents' lives through a concerted effort, and that they could develop important caring skills in the process.

The Structure

In the first year of operation the course was team-taught. This provided vital mutual support with the early organizational problems. In an effort to provide as wide a choice as possible, we surveyed various community services that were able to use student volunteers effectively. In addition to the nursing home, we offered student placements with the CNIB, the Ottawa District Association for the Mentally Retarded Saturday morning programs, Citizen Advocacy, day-care centres and even the Royal Ottawa psychiatric out-patient program. Although the choices were varied, many proved to be very difficult to monitor. Since that first year, all students wishing

to participate have been placed with residents of the nursing home.

The Procedure

In early September the students were introduced to the objectives and history of the program. No commitment was required until an introductory unit dealing with the socialization process and geriatrics was underway. The geriatrics study included an historical survey of aging, a sociological analysis of the aged in the 1980s, various studies of physical and emotional changes occurring in old age, gender differences and social class considerations. An especially important component of the unit dealt with interviewing and conversational skills, since a number of the residents had regressed to the point where they had lost the will or ability to sustain long-term conversation.

In October the students were required to make a decision about their involvement. Those who chose not to participate produced a conventional assignment load of several reports or a major paper. These non-participants frequently did visit the home with friends and many came out to the parties we organized for the residents.

The students were asked to fill out a questionnaire of interests. Then they were matched with residents who had expressed an interest in being visited regularly by a student. The nursing home nurse and social director addressed the students at a group session. This was followed by an individual introduction to the resident. On the completion of each visit the student was required to have the floor nurse sign a time sheet to validate the time spent. At the beginning of the session the students were encouraged to visit in pairs so that the primary relationship would have a chance to grow in the presence of others. Several times during the year the course members put on a party



Photo courtesy of Sharon Cook

Some wonderful friendships emerged.

or evening of Bingo, providing small prizes from the Students' Council's largesse. Throughout the year class time was set aside to discuss problems that had arisen with one's resident or with the structure. These group counselling sessions never failed to be fascinating for me. Near the project's conclusion each year, the students were instructed in weaning the relationship so that the break would not be too upsetting for either party.

Assignments

One of the course requirements was to complete a book critique during the first term. Those students in the field placement program (by far the majority) were required to choose a book that related in some way to the resident. For example, a student caring for a resident with circulation problems might read a book dealing with the physical aging process or with circulation problems generally.

An interim report was required after three months in the project. This detailed the periodical readings completed (five articles were required), the behavioural objective to be addressed and the procedure to be attempted. For example, many of the residents were depressed and prone to isolating themselves. The objective in this case might be to encourage the resident to integrate

further into group activities with the companionship of the student as a support.

A final report was required at the conclusion of the project. This detailed what had actually been accomplished and attempted to bring together the readings and experiences into a coherent set of conclusions. As part of this final report a number of students elected to interview the resident over a period of weeks and produce an oral history of about five segments. This required the construction of a set of leading questions, a tape recorder and some editing skills.

Integration in School Activities

We made a number of attempts to link the school and nursing home in tangible ways. In addition to enlisting the aid of the Students' Council in the provision of prizes for parties at the home, the more mobile residents were invited to attend the school's concerts and dramatic productions. To demonstrate the school's support for the extra time students invested in the program, the principal provided a letter of reference for all students, indicating the degree of commitment and skill that had been demonstrated by students completing the six months. The project became a source of pride for staff and students and was

highlighted as part of the school's record of community service.

Evaluation

On the whole the experiment has worked very well, as evidenced by its survival for five years. In our view our students recognized that they were making an important contribution to their community. There was a high level of responsibility shown; only rarely did students fail to complete the term with their residents and most visited faithfully through exam periods and school holidays.

Some wonderful friendships emerged. One elderly lady with no family was taken home twice by her student, once for a family dinner and then again for a neighbourhood party. Although the intention was that the student would be the resident's care-giver, it was sometimes difficult to see who was caring for whom. One student was teamed with a remarkable elderly woman who had a comfortable room in the home. The student's family was

burdened at the time by a sister who had returned home with her two small children. The student went several times a week to visit this fine lady who kept a desk cleared just for him so that he could work quietly. She arranged for him to have a cup of tea in the evening after they had worked through his homework.

Through several evaluations our students repeatedly told us that they felt enriched by the experience and more skilled in human dynamics. When dealing with certain sociological concepts, the nursing home example did help with comprehension. Students who were not accustomed to doing well in senior social science courses, were rewarded for nurturant skills and often received high marks.

But there were also problems. Some students were neither good students nor particularly good citizens, and they did occasionally provide some concern and embarrassment for us. These instances were, as I have noted, a much smaller percentage than had anticipated. On

occasion the seniors were obstreperous, inconsiderate or confused with the students, but these instances also were few and manageable.

Every year a few residents died before the project finished. This never failed to be a wrenching experience for the students. Our adolescents have little real experience with death and, as a result, it is all the more upsetting for them. Nevertheless, we believe that this acquaintance with the real world is one of the program's great strengths.

Finally, the organization is a burden for the teacher since fairly regular communication must be maintained with the residence. That having been noted, I regard my involvement with the program to have been one of the highlights of a rewarding teaching career. I will not soon forget the woman suffering from Alzheimer's Disease who wandered into our party one night and taught a group of us some new square-dance steps and then stayed to play the harmonica. She seemed to have a good time; I know I did.



Students participate with seniors on Bingo Night.

Photo courtesy of Sharon Cook



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